

The last word

Teaching the "other," being white, male, and middle class

by Chuck Kleinhans

It seemed to happen by chance. Without deliberate planning, for the past twenty some years of teaching I've frequently taught "the Other" in the dual sense of teaching about people/cultures different from my own identity (the main sense in which I'll use the term in what follows), and teaching specific students who are other than male, white, and middle class, to use three categories of my identity. To clarify who I am, I could add a few other identity categories that I'm usually reminded of daily: married, heterosexual, U.S. citizen, childless, professor, Chicagoan, political radical, and middle aged.

I want to reflect on my experience here because it may be useful to people interested in issues of "multicultural education," to use the current term, in understanding their own histories and connections to diversity in education issues. Also, I think I've learned some things about course planning, classroom strategy, and student advising that apply to many arts, humanities, and social science teaching situations.

#### THE DOUBLE BIND

I'll start with the most obvious point: teaching the Other immediately creates a double bind. On the one hand, people can say you lack qualifications to teach about an Other unless you belong to that group. (I'll return to this point.) On the other hand, one can say that you are something-centric (or racist, sexist, homophobic, or whatever), if you don't include the Other in your teaching. I think that the only ethical thing to do is just acknowledge the double bind. Then you go ahead and teach the Other, acknowledging the problems, and acting with humility to learn what you can from and about the Other in the process of preparing to teach. Hopefully, you can then create a classroom climate that lets those Others taking the course contribute to the group learning and to educating the teacher.

In other words, I'm arguing that the ground rules for classroom learning about diversity include the teacher specifying where he/she is coming from. That allows for reflection on how teachers and students move from ignorance to knowledge. This makes many teachers uncomfortable. They are used to controlling the learning situation in a fairly direct, if benevolent, way.

There's a commonplace of liberal thought which assumes that presenting "multiple perspectives" on a theme or issue or encouraging "different views" in and of itself leads to progressive education. But this view remains blind to the fundamental control the teacher has in forming the curriculum, rewarding and discouraging students in verbal and nonverbal ways, and the fact that classes end with the teacher giving a grade. In the 1960s, reacting to both authoritarian and liberal versions of the classroom, one strain of New Left thought argued for a totally democratized classroom without any hierarchy. But experiments based on such a model quickly showed that power was not evacuated but simply constructed in more subtle and often more pernicious ways.

My argument for starting from the open recognition of one's own historical position, one's own privilege, one's own ignorance, and as a teacher one's position of power in the classroom stems from my understanding that if these things are put forward directly, they can then be open for discussion. Today we're at an interesting juncture in multiculturalism in higher education. From a past in the late 60s and early 70s establishment of programs and departments usually related to social-political movements and based in identity politics, we've seen an economic and administrative retrenchment putting many of these units at risk. An increasingly virulent attack from academic and political conservatives, criticizing Political Correctness, defends the canon. At the same time, we've seen significant changes in higher education as a result of changing demographics and a changing workforce. Education in cultural and gender difference today prepares students to be tomorrow's managers and professionals. (Previous JUMP CUT editorials in issues 34, 36, and 37, discussed some of these issues.)

My argument is not based on the idea that somehow we are "all oppressed" or that we can simply through good will step aside from our personal evolution. Rather, I'm saying that the teacher must begin by finding the locations where one moves from ignorance to knowledge. That's a pragmatic answer. I can also make the point more philosophically.

"Identity politics" has been important in bonding various social-political movements in the last 45 years or so, particularly in the United States. However, identity politics often relies on the assumption that inside this group or movement, "we're all alike." In this way it falls into a fateful essentialism. On reflection, the argument of identity politics that "we're all alike" involves a disastrous slippage from the common sense observation that, "we have something in common that binds us together," to a whacky oversimplification.

We can see the historical results of such a position today in the hostile nationalisms devouring eastern Europe, and repressive religious fundamentalism in Islam and elsewhere. But we also see it in U.S. social movements when they've had problems coming to terms with diversity and variety in their own constituency. As many feminists now admit, sometimes feminism hasn't dealt adequately with race and class. And sometimes racial/ethnic movements haven't dealt well with gender and class issues. And frequently class-based movements ranging from trade unions and community organizations to left organizations and projects haven't dealt well with race and gender issues.

My answer to this part of the dilemma rests on what I see as the historical fact of cross-cultural exchange and what seems like a universal human curiosity about Others. Cultural exchange probably always starts with some level of misunderstanding on both sides. But we don't have to be afraid of that, if we recognize the complications of power differentials and try to come to terms with them: a point to which I'll return.

Much more could be said about this. Basically, I don't think anyone can take on the double bind of teaching the Other without experiencing the combination of skepticism and interest (sometimes the extremes of hostility and gratefulness) which Others have in finding you talking about Them. Also, it can't be solved in the abstract, so let me speak concretely about my experiences, narrowing it down to the question of how I teach African American issues in the film classroom.

#### EXPERIENCE/CREDENTIALS

I'd like to explain briefly my own history in dealing with African American issues and film. Like many other young white people of my generation (b. 1942), I came to adulthood with the strong cultural influence of African American music. In particular I listened to and learned about jazz on Chicago radio, and later rhythm and blues, and blues. At the same time, in the later 50s and early 60s, the Civil Rights Movement was a decisive formative influence in demonstrating the effective linking of moral/ethical concerns and political action. These were, I want to point out, fundamentally mediated experiences—things that influenced me from the media, from mass culture. Growing up first in a predominantly Polish and European working class neighborhood in Chicago, and then going to high school in a white middle class suburb, Park Ridge, Illinois, I had some understanding of ethnicity but no direct knowledge of black Americans or other people of color, until, in summer jobs, I worked with them.

In graduate school in Comparative Literature at Indiana University I took a course in African and African American literature and was involved in tutoring black students admitted under a special program to increase minority numbers at IU. Subsequently I was asked by Afro-American Studies to teach a section of the freshman introductory course in Comp Lit for these students. Before I accepted the offer, I asked if it wouldn't be better to have a black teacher in the classroom. Of course, I was told, but there wasn't one, so didn't I think it would be better to have me in the situation than Any Teacher? Of course, I agreed, and I changed the curriculum to have a major section on African, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-American literature.

What was clear from this was that institutional/ structural/ economic constraints shape any such situation. I also saw that no one individual teacher could really overcome those limits alone. To fail to acknowledge those problems and not to try to work on them results in a selective vision that can easily lead to antagonism with colleagues. Certainly including more about blacks or women in the curriculum is a good thing and a long sought goal. Obviously, given the current economic crunch in higher education, the faculty who have sacrificed to build ethnic studies programs and women's studies programs can hardly feel this is such a wonderful thing for white men to be doing when their own precarious programs are being cut.

Later, I taught freshman and remedial English part time at Chicago State, an historically black school which enrolled a student body at that time about 80% African American and overall about 90% of which were the first in their families to go to college. I also taught composition and English as a Second Language to Latinos part time at Northeastern Illinois, a school with a very large working class base and racial/ethnic diversity.

Since 1977 I've taught in the Radio/TV/Film department at Northwestern, an elite private school, which enrolls about 8% African American undergraduates and which in the current economic/demographic phase of higher education is trying to recruit black middle class students. At NU I've had a chance to teach many different black films and tapes and even, once a entire course on independent African American film. I've done some research and writing on the subject, but I wouldn't call myself a specialist on the subject. That is, I don't consider myself an expert, but I seem to know more about the subject than almost any other white teachers I've met

#### TEACHING STRATEGY: PROBLEMS AND CONTROVERSIES

The most important thing I have to say about teaching black film in general, and independent African American tapes and

films in particular, from the position of being a white teacher, is that it is very important to "teach the problems." That is, the teacher must recognize and be prepared for different issues that come up with reference to specific films. Then one must teach in such a way as to make it clear to all the students that there is a significant question at stake, that there is controversy of opinions on the matter, and that different people will have different reactions.

Let me give an example: if you show Spike Lee's SHE'S GOTFA HAVE IT, you have to be prepared for a discussion of his depiction of women (actually this applies to all the Lee films), and, I would argue, provoke it if it doesn't happen. Similarly, if you teach his film SCHOOL DAZE, you have to be ready for a discussion of the color line and class/caste line in the middle class black student community. Of course everyone knows that Lee's work has been controversial as when some white critics feared that DO THE RIGHT THING would provoke blacks to riot. But there's another level of commentary and criticism of the piece represented among African American critics, and the point I want to make is that it's important to be aware of that too. Michelle Wallace and bell hooks (Gloria Watkins) discussed Lee and his depiction of women in articles now reprinted in their recent anthologies. Robert Chrisman wrote a powerful critique of the politics of DO THE RIGHT THING in *The Black Scholar*. Whoopi Goldberg tartly responded to Lee's earlier public criticism of the comedian and offered her own analysis of the flaws in JUNGLE FEVER on an Home Box Office special. And independent videomaker Marlon Riggs has critiqued Lee's homophobia.

In other words, it's important to realize that there's not one white opinion or interpretation of a Lee film and not one black interpretation of it, but a number of different interpretations. So, part of the necessary research in preparation for teaching has to be to find examples of those different positions. To develop this the teacher must make the effort to look "on the margins of the margins." One must ask oneself, "Well, how do black women filmmakers handle these issues? What issues do they deal with that might be different from the current attention given to urban black youth and criminals by many of the current crop of African American male filmmakers?"

What I'm calling for then, is for a teacher who is not only choosing to show black films (stage one) but also to be aware of the issues and criticism surrounding those films in the African American community as well as the white press (stage two). And finally, the teacher needs to be attentive to emerging trends and voices (stage three). We could call stage one the Arsenio Hall approach of putting black celebrity artists up front with a spotlight. Stage two

involves realizing and working with the actual complexities of the subject and accepting the fact of diversity and contradiction in the artistic production as well as in the African American community. The third stage involves seeking the cutting edge, the ferment on the margins, the place where change and development is still in the process of happening. Personally, for me this last stage is the most interesting. It involves research of the most exciting kind.

I would argue that to merely do the first thing--to simply show and celebrate black film--is doing the right thing. It is good because it gives audiences, black and white, a chance to see important work, and it gives students much to experience and think about. But in the long run ends up being a kind of patronizing racism for whites to not be aware of and take seriously both the questions raised by such work and the actual ongoing criticism and discussion of these films by African American critics. And the teacher misses some of the most interesting things if not alert to emerging trends, new artists, yet-to-be-validated work.

On the other hand, I'm equally wary of white teachers (and exhibitors and critics) taking up this or that film or tape and giving it the validation of extended consideration. It is all too easy for teachers and critics (black and white) to perform that intellectual task we've been so well trained for--making a strong and assertive judgement of value. The problem with this act at the present moment is that obviously whites have more power as a group and, in many cases individually, to validate some works. And such a validation will often be within the framework of what is already familiar to the teacher's frame of reference. It may be relatively easy to validate the current "homeboys" films because action and gang violence genres and themes are well known in mainstream white commercial cinema. But the beauties of a languid pace and different visual rhythms in Julie Dash's DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST may escape the instructor not familiar with the director's debts to certain traditions in African American women's literature.

And as the teacher who has designed a course and will grade students at the end, one has much power to shape understanding. We know that selective filtering was one of the problems that came up in the Harlem Renaissance when you had white gatekeepers making decisions about what was worthy of publication and critical acclaim. Though I would add that much of the denunciation of that phenomenon has been facile and doesn't begin to address what was in the arrangement for both sides. The actual facts of and potential for whites and African Americans establishing bonds of personal friendship, intellectual mutual respect, and artistic collaboration remains open to consideration.

The point is--to return to my pragmatic assertion that we must "teach the problems"--we must keep open the possibilities of different interpretations, of different value systems being brought to bear on creative work. This is good pedagogy, and it is also common sense. After all, we want students to be able to interact critically with a work and with each other in classroom discussion. By "teaching the problems" we are able to create the space for questions to be raised, for example questioning Spike Lee's ability to fully address some of the issues he brings up in his films, or his ability to create plausible female characters, or to take issue with some of his apparent positions.

This also addresses an important question in classroom dynamics. If one is teaching black media to a predominantly white class, a certain "burden of representation" is put on African American students in the class. This is most severe when there is only one or a few black students. What I'm referring to is the tendency of that student or those particular students to be taken as representing all African American people. Thus by expressing an opinion on this or that aspect of the film in discussion, a student can be taken as The Authority ("Gee, I guess that that's what all black people would think of that scene"). Such a dynamic clearly gets in the way of a pedagogically challenging classroom experience for white and black students. A work such as SCHOOL DAZE operates in a certain somewhat Brechtian way to divide its black audience. That is viewers are asked to identify with one of the two campus groups depicted--the assimilationist "wannabees" and the nationalist "jigaboos" (although significantly, the working class local community is also shown in the significant scene at the fried chicken place). Thus a polarized discussion should follow the screening.

I should add here two things. Simply to think/ teach/ write with this multiple focus, one is driven to the extended aside, footnote, and parenthetical expression, a fact of dialectical thinking--to use a good Marxist phrase--or "dialogism" to use a hip euphemism currently popular in poststructuralist circles. We need to develop complex ways of thinking about such cultural phenomena. Second, I've started using Spike Lee as a reference point precisely because his work is so well known and accessible on video at this point that I can trust most of my readers have seen some of his work. In addition, given his remarkable achievements as a filmmaker, Lee inevitably takes a position in critical discourse as someone whose work can be criticized in a shorthand way without distorting the significance of the films as might be the case with lesser known or less accomplished figures.

A LITTLE CONCLUSION

I don't have an all-purpose one-size-fits-all formula for the double bind of teaching the culture of an Other. I do think that on a simple existential level, almost everyone can actually understand and empathize with otherness in one way or another. In a certain sense everyone is an Other one way or another. Raised as a Christian Scientist, some of my strongest childhood memories are of feeling distinctly different and misunderstood by being part of a peculiar sect.

And in the past decade I've sometimes experienced some pretty unpleasant ageism when working with some ignorant twenty-somethings. And I've even discovered that I belong to an Equal Opportunities "protected category," Vietnam era veterans-though I don't really know what to make of that. But to simply discuss difference without also discussing power linked to difference is to undercut real understanding and the possibility for effective action for change. Which means that in the final analysis, one must move as well into institutional and political understanding of the situation.

Finally one must move from understanding to action directed at change. Multiculturalism can never be fully implemented simply by having teachers of good will do their individual best. Institutional structures intervene, and issues of program support, faculty hiring, student financial aid, recruiting and admissions practices, the campus social climate, and many others have to be taken into account along with curriculum change. To that end, forming effective organizations for change and alliances on campus and with off campus constituencies is the logical continuation of a commitment to multiculturalism in the classroom.

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